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The Revolutionary War 'neutral ground' of Westchester County

Loyalist returning from neutral ground raid with confiscated cattle.

In chronicles of Westchester County and the Revolutionary War, the sobriquet "neutral ground" generates a grim vision of war's destructive side. Throughout the conflict, the area sandwiched between the armies was a forbidding place -- the scene of countless raids, foraging expeditions and pillaging operations. The remaining civilian population, since most with an alternative eventually left, was reduced to a level of desperation reflected in the oft quoted description, "They feared everybody whom they saw."

Many local histories and scholarly articles narrate the struggles of the neutral ground, which is today symbolized by the extant St. Paul's Church. A particularly valuable account of this un-heroic phase of the Revolutionary War is by Dr. Sung Bok Kim, former Distinguished Professor of History at the State University of New York at Albany. Professor Kim cogently analyzes the numbing effect on county residents of the succession of attacks by unorganized bands, partisans and the armies. Dr. Kim's The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York appeared in **The Journal of American History** in 1993. The article would be available online at http://academic.csuohio.edu/humphreyt/History601/601%20Readings/Kim.pdf.

But how was the neutral ground created? Why was the area so ungovernable? Why was there no effort to assert civilian control? Answers to these questions, which reveal the vacuum of jurisdiction that led by default to the neutral ground, center upon the geopolitical circumstances of lower New York and especially the strategic decision of General Washington to maintain the Continental army as a unified fighting force.

The parameters of a neutral ground emerged following the New York campaign of 1776, which left the British forces firmly in control of Manhattan, the base of their operations to subdue the rebellion over the next seven years. To secure that establishment, the British situated camps at the southern end of Westchester County. These entrenched positions helped the British and Loyalists, as needed, obtain the provisions and materials of war,

and to threaten and destabilize the rebel territory. While conditions on the neutral ground were horrific, it was a geographic abstraction lacking clearly defined borders. Even as a no man's land between warring parties, there were shifts over a long period of instability. However, in general, the northern limit of the neutral ground was a line across the county east to west from Dobbs Ferry on the Hudson River to Mamaroneck on the Long Island Sound. So we are talking about an area roughly 15 miles north to south and perhaps 10 miles east to west, or about 150 square miles.

As it turned out, sustaining stable conditions for civilian life in Westchester was an immense challenge for the newly constituted government of an independent New York, which never realized how long the Redcoats would be parked in the southern section of the state. But broadly speaking, responsibility for securing the territorial integrity of the county did lie with the civilian government, especially Governor George Clinton. Other parts of lower New York, which encompassed Long Island and Staten Island, as well as Manhattan, were firmly under British control. Responsibility for establishing American sovereignty in those areas rested with the Continental army.

We should consider that other regions of the newly independent states also had to wrestle with novel responsibilities of maintaining civil peace and protecting life and property during wartime. In stable areas remote from combat or British troop presence, local militias and various Patriot committees proved adept at maintaining stable conditions. In Westchester County, it was initially presumed that such institutions under civilian control might be sufficient to secure normal civilian life. But the challenge was much greater, most obviously because of the proximity of the Crown forces. The mixed political outlook of the population, with some initial opposition to the Revolution and a strong sentiment of neutrality, meant that the Patriot government could not automatically count on community support in efforts to stabilize the region.

Governor Clinton and other civilian leaders tried to deploy their limited resources, which proved inadequate, and they took the next obvious step: an appeal to national authorities for support.

In the 18th century Anglo-American world, ample precedent existed for such an assumption of responsibility for public safety. Even in London, police forces were modest in size and scope. Most Britons equated a large, visible police presence with absolutist monarchial countries, such as France, and would have resisted such a force. Large scale outbursts of disorder and instability drew out the British army as a sort of national police unit. A notable episode in the time period

Redcoats subdue the Gordon riots of June 1780 in London.

under discussion was the Redcoats' response to the Gordon riots of June 1780, one of London's largest civil disturbances in the 18th century.

Those approaches to law enforcement translated across the ocean to the colonies, with public safety officers often limited to county sheriffs and local constables. More immediately, the British army served as a security force in the colonies, too. In New York's Hudson Valley, several English regiments subdued the land riots of 1766, caused by aggressive New Englanders who rebelled against the landlord/tenant farming conditions of the large estates along the Hudson River. These areas were immediately adjacent to the eventual Revolutionary War neutral ground. In other words, many people in the vicinity had a living memory of regular army troops deploying to restore civil conditions when local authorities were overwhelmed by the challenge. Those forces of stability were not available during the Revolutionary War; if anything, British army units, and especially Loyalist companies, created a fair share of the troubles in the neutral ground beginning in 1777.

But the crucial ingredient in comprehending the lawlessness of the neutral ground was General Washington's understanding of the role of the Continental army. The commander in chief insisted that in a revolutionary setting, with the prospects of the new country very much in doubt, his national force should be respected as a military arm which required concentration and cohesion -- no small task through much of the war. A potent symbol of the survival of the Revolution, the national army needed to be upheld as a force to ultimately win decisive battles and achieve independence.

After the New York campaign of 1776, Washington developed a strategic imperative to avoid large scale land fighting, favoring occasional strategic engagements on ground and timing of his choosing. The Continentals resisted British attempts to engineer circumstances for major battles. An army built around that strategy disdained entrapment in local skirmishes and was careful to avoid being lured into acting as a super police force to sustain conditions for normal civilian life, despite many pleas for assistance from public officials. The much greater American objective was to maintain a viable threat to Manhattan, and await the proper naval support for an attack on the British forces that General Washington had long contemplated. In the meantime, unfortunately, the exigencies of the geopolitical setting called for the 'sacrifice' of the neutral ground.

Could the presence and determination of regular troops, in sufficient strength and size, have maintained security in lower Westchester?

A combined American-French operation in July 1781 demonstrated that they probably could have. This expedition into the region was part of the movement of the allied armies down to Yorktown, Virginia for what developed into the decisive battle of October 1781. Mounted French troops under the Duc De Lauzon joined thousands of Continentals, some commanded by General Washington, in a march through the St. Paul's vicinity. While it turned out to be a probing movement rather than an invasion of Manhattan, the incident demonstrated American strength and altered the landscape of the neutral ground. British and German troops withstood some of the American attacks, and

a few of Loyalists camps, which were the source of most of the raids, were shifted. Yet, the Patriots inflicted extensive damage on the enemy and transferred their lines several miles south, placing the area more firmly in American hands that any time since the fall of 1776, encouraging the resumption of normal civilian life.

There is little doubt that a similar concentration of units earlier in the war period could have improved local conditions for civilian life. But prior to 1781 broader strategic concerns about ultimate American victory in the War for Independence determined the allocation and concentration of forces. In the meantime, residents vacated the county to spend those desperate years at the homes of relatives or friends, in empty dwellings, at refugee camps, or perhaps camping in open fields -- anyplace but the neutral ground.